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Combat Patrol Sweeps Filled Viet Prisons

Separating Friends From Foes

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Six years of International Red Cross reports from South Vietnam depict a huge armed effort to separate friend from foe in Vietnam's combat zones and to confine the foes in a steadily expanding system of camps and prisons.

The reports on the prisons, prisoner-of-war camps and interrogation centers set up in South Vietnam—often with American advice and assistance—cover the years 1968 to 1972.

Two cartons of reports, forwarded to the U.S. government during the Vietnam war, were declassified after the war by the State Department, ending a 2½-year lawsuit to make them public. The suit was brought under the Freedom of Information Act by Lawyers at Ralph Nader's Public Citizens' Litigation Group, headquartered in Washington.

The all-Swiss mission of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), watching for violations of the 1949 Geneva convention on treatment for prisoners of war, inspected and re-inspected almost 100 facilities throughout the war and termed most of them satisfactory.

Through medical examination, however, ICRC inspectors discovered evidence of mistreatment and brutality, including beatings and torture, at two large prisons and the two principal Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camps.

Those four facilities held more than one-third of the penal system's approximate capacity of 65,000 to 70,000 people.

"It's all relative," said Michael G. McCann, the last chief of U.S. prison and police advisers in Vietnam. "The conditions in some of the prisons were better than in that big refugee camp near Danang."

McCann, now working for the Agency for International Development here, was one of several U.S. civilian and military officials with knowledge of the Vietnamese prison system interviewed to supplement information recorded in French in the reports.

Four ICRC officials, in New York and Geneva, also were interviewed.

The separation of friend from foe in Vietnam often began on combat patrol sweeps through fields, jungles, villages and hamlets.

However, the ICRC delegates—doctors, lawyers and other professionals—began inspecting the process at the next step—the classification of persons, detained by troops, into one of four categories.

These categories were innocent civilians, who were in the majority and were sent home; prisoners of war, civilians changing sides and civilian prisoners.

For example, on a June, 1968, visit to a classification center set up by the U.S. 9th Division at Dongtam, four ICRC delegates found 37 people—35 men and two women, aged 18 to 35—detained. Sixteen had been classified innocent, 17 given prisoner-of-war status, and four were called civilian prisoners. One of these was a woman accused of carrying ammunition.

"She will be transferred to Mytho and given to the (Vietnamese) police," the report said. "She had her baby with her."

The road from classification to confinement could branch off, for the wounded, into a bed at a U.S. military hospital, where, the reports said, prisoners got the same treatment as U.S. soldiers.

It also could branch off temporarily into one of a network of interrogation centers. The reports mention a totally dark cell in the main center in Saigon.

Eventually, however, most of those picked up in the field sweeps were sent to prisoner-of-war camps, civilian prisons, or camps for civilians who signed up to switch allegiance from the Vietcong to the Saigon government. There are no Red Cross reports on the last facilities.

The Red Cross records show that most of the prisoners fell into the ill-defined category of civilian prisoners, then called "civil defendants."

In Vietnam's irregular war, the reports show, American combat units took and classified more civil defendants than POWs. At American-run prisoner "collecting points," the classifications were made after interrogation by mixed U.S. and South Vietnamese military intelligence teams.

The U.S. regulation governing prisoner classification in Vietnam stated that each unit was "wholly responsible" for each classification made. And, in 1970, the United States told the ICRC in a letter that it considered itself responsible for the treatment of all prisoners, civilians and POWs, captured by U.S. troops.

From the field collecting points, POWs were sent to Vietnamese-run prison camps, where, according to U.S. military regulations, U.S. advisers kept track of, and were held responsible, for them. The ICRC teams regularly visited these camps.

Similar classifications were used, prison reports show, for civilians taken into custody by Vietnamese authorities—the American-trained national police, the paramilitary field police who accompanied troops on sweeps through villages—or seized in the CIA-sponsored Phoenix program, under which thousands of suspected Vietcong were arrested and imprisoned.

CIA Director William E. Colby, former head of the pacification program in Vietnam, told a House committee in 1971 that although these arrests were made by Vietnamese personnel, "I was never able to take the position that if something wrong went on over there it could be sort of left to the Vietnamese as to responsibility. I felt that our country and our government are involved in support of the overall effort there, that there is nothing we can say (that) we do not have some responsibility to improve, to do something about."

Asked at that hearing, "Are you certain that we know a member of the Vietcong infrastructure from a loyal member of the South Vietnamese citizenry?" Colby replied, "No . . . I am not."

According to McCann, however, once the suspects were brought before the "provincial security committees" that decided their fate, "the gray was more in our minds than theirs. They knew their own people." These committees could send civil prisoners away for up to two years without trial.

"Civil defendants" were handed over as offenders under Vietnamese law to South Vietnam's police, who often treated them as political prisoners, according to some of the reports and ICRC officials.

These prisoners dropped into a gray area, usually outside the view of ICRC inspectors and away from the benefits of the pressure of their complaints to South Vietnamese officials. The South Vietnamese government, according to a ICRC spokesman, would not let the Red Cross freely visit and report on civil prisons.

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